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ABSTRACT

Research has shown that communication apprehension (CA) has an impact on academic achievement over and beyond intelligence, type of performance-oriented class, language proficiency, and amount of verbal activity. A study explored the idea that this relationship is context-based by examining the impact of CA in the generalized contexts of small groups, dyads, meetings, and public speaking situations on college students' classroom achievement. In addition, the study investigated the relationships among students' CA, their perceptions of nonverbal immediacy (the degree of perceived physical or psychological closeness between communicators) in general and specific contexts, and their final course grades. Subjects, 389 students in a basic communication skills course, completed measures of CA and nonverbal immediacy. Results showed that high apprehensive students did not receive lower final course grades than did moderate or low apprehensive students. Further, final grades were not affected by students' perceptions of either general or contextual immediacy. Communication apprehension, overall and in generalized contexts, was significantly correlated with generalized and contextual immediacy. As expected, when CA increased, immediacy became lower. (FL)

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COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION, GENERALIZED AND CONTEXTUAL IMMEDIACY AND ACHIEVEMENT IN THE BASIC COURSE

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CS 505 302

COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION, GENERALIZED AND CONTEXTUAL IMMEDIACY AND ACHIEVEMENT IN THE BASIC COURSE

Jerry L. Allen, Kathleen M. Long and Joan O'Mara

ABSTRACT

Past research concludes that communication apprehension (CA) impacts academic achievement over and beyond intelligence, type of performance-oriented class, language proficiency, and amount of verbal activity. This study explores the possibility that this relationship is context-based by examining the impact of CA in the generalized contexts of small group, dyads, meetings and public speaking on the students' classroom achievement. Further, this study investigates the relationships among students' CA, their perceptions of nonverbal immediacy in general and specific contexts and their final course grades.

This study of 389 students found that CA means were not significantly different for any final grade. Further, final grades were not affected by their perceptions of either general or contextual immediacy. These findings question previous research which indicates that those who are highly apprehensive receive lower final grades than do moderately or lowly apprehensive students. CA, overall and in generalized contexts, was significantly correlated with generalized and contextual immediacy. As was expected when CA increased, immediacy became lower. However, it appears that students feel more comfortable interacting -- less apprehensive and more nonverbally immediate -- in the context of their communication class than in other educational and non-educational settings.

COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION, GENERALIZED AND CONTEXTUAL IMMEDIACY AND ACHIEVEMENT IN THE BASIC COURSE

A recent bibliographical compilation lists over 800 articles and conference papers which have dealt with communication apprehension (CA) and other constructs related to communication anxiety and avoidance (Payne & Richmond, 1984). An increasing body of research showes that the behavioral and personality correlates of these constructs are personal, social, occupational, and educational handicaps for approximately 20 percent of the U.S. population (Daly & McCroskey, 1984; Richmond & McCroskey, 1985). Students who are highly communication apprehensive have been found to be at a disadvantage academically (McCroskey, 1977). In fact, a recent survey of research into the effects of communication avoidance concluded that the fact that quiet students are less likely to get into touble with the teacher may be the only positive impact of CA in the educational environment (Richmond & McCroskey, 1985).

Even though there is no meaningful difference in intelligence (Bashore, 1971; McCroskey, Daly, & Sorensen, 1976), quiet students on average score lower on standardized achievement tests such as ACT and SAT than do their talkative peers. Studies indicate that students who are quiet achieve less than their aptitudes would justify, and that talkative students achieve at a level above that which their aptitudes would justify. Quiet students show little willingness to engage in communication with instructors and peers; are less likely to be called upon in

class; receive less attention and reinforcement from instructors; ask for help less frequently; and volunteer to participate less frequently in class. It would appear that quiet students learn less, and are evaluated lower by instructors than are more talkative students. Quiet students are often thought to be slow, lazy, or disinterested (McCroskey & Andersen, 1976; McCroskey & Daly, 1976; McCroskey, 1977; Scott & Wheeless, 1977).

Some research focusing on the relationship between CA and academic achievement has concluded that CA is negatively related to final grades. Hurt and Preisss (1978) found that middle-school students who were highly apprehensive had less positive attitudes toward school and received lower grades overall. Powers and Smythe (1980) found significant differences in some performance evaluations and final course grade among low, moderate, and high CAs in a basic, performance-oriented speech course. However, some previous studies indicate that the academic achievement of those who are high CAs may be greater in classes emphasizing individualized instruction (Scott, Wheeless, Yates, & Randolph, 1977), or communication-restricted (large lecture) strategies (McCroskey & Andersen, 1976). Further, some researchers have found support for the contention that the differences in achievement may not be consistently clear-cut in terms of students' levels of CA. At least two studies, conducted in varied contexts, found that high and moderate CAs did not differ in academic achievement, and that low CAs showed only a modest

increase in achievement over those classified as high or moderate CAs (Scott, Wheeless, Yates, & Randolph, 1977; Davis & Scott, 1978). On the other hand, Allen (1984) found that students in the basic communication course who were highly apprehensive received significantly lower grades than those who were moderately or lowly apprehensive, and that those at the moderate and low levels of CA did not differ in terms of the final grade received. Type of basic course--inpersonal, with no speeches given, or public speaking, with 5-6 speeches presented by each student--do no affect the levels of CA or achievement.

Taken as a whoe, the research which has focused on CA in relation to academic achievement indicates a fairly consistent pattern of effects. Commmunication apprehension inpacts academic achievement over and beyond intellgence and type of performance-oriented class (e.g., discussion, interpersonal, public speaking). There is some evidence that differences may not be as acute in non-traditional (e.g., personalized instruction) or communication restricted (large lecture) modes, but this is of little solave to the instructor whose course is in the university's core urriculum to develop and refine students' communication skills. Research into the mediational effects of other variables has also served to increase the generalizability of a relationship between CA and academic achievement. For example, Davis and Scott (1978) found the amount of verbal activity to be a less compelling explanation, and Andriate and

Allen (1984) found that language proficiency was mot a mediating factor in students' levels of CA and academic achievement. Yet, those who are high CAs are likely to be perceived as lacking in communicating skills and be placed and evaluated lower.

Most studies have attempted to examine the effects of CA on achievement as a gross criterion or overall trait. Few researchers have examined the possibility that the relationship between CA and academic achievement is context-based. McCroskey's latest version of the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension, the PRCA-24, allows for measurement of CA in the generalized contexts of small groups, dyads, meetings, and public speaking (McCroskey, 1986). In addition to replicating previous studies of the relationship between CA and achievement, a purpose of the study reported here was to examine the possible impact of context-type CA on students' academic achievement.

The learned helplessness explanation of the development of communication apprehension suggests that individuals learn to feel anxious in situations when they perceive little control over their fate. Communicating in such contexts may result in lowered affective thesholds culminating in heightened anxiety, withdrawal, and a willingness to suffer the negative consequences of not communicating (such as lower academic evaluations, fewer job opportunities, less social interaction, etc.) rather then engaging in a behavior for which the individual has negative expectations

(McCroskey, 1984b; Richmond & McCroskey, 1985).

This avoidance behavior of those who are highly apprehensive about communicating is a negative manifestation of a more global communication construct labeled "nonverbal immediacy." Nonverbal immediacy is the degree of perceived physical or psychological closeness between communicators (Andersen, 1979). According to Mehrabian (1971), communication behavior patterns can be understood by using the following immediacy principle: "People are drawn toward persons and things they like, evaluate highly, and prefer; and they avoid or move away from things they dislike, evaluate negatively, or do not prefer" (p.1). The most common immediacy behaviors are communication with another at close proximity, smiling, positive facial affect, eye contact, using direct body orientations, touching, positive body movements and gesturing, and vocal expressiveness (Andersen, 1979).

Behaviorally, immediacy is the actual approach behaviors of a person toward another person or situation, while nonimmediacy is the actual avoidance of a person or situation (e.g., communication). Affectively, people are nonverbally immediate with things, people, and situations they like, while being nonverbally nonimmediate with things, people, and situations they don't like (e.g., communication). Hence, the highly communication apprehensive person would be expected to be less behaviorally immediate with other people because of his/her dislike and fear of

communication situations.

The person who uses more immediate behaviors will be perceived by others as more likeable, friendly, and generally attractive (Richmond & McCroskey, 1985). Such behaviors are likely to affect instructors academic evaluations of students. For example, evidence indicates that students who are perceived as less attractive are evaluated lower than those who are perceived as attractive (Foster, Pearson, & Imahori). Moreover, considerable research indicates that students who are high in communication apprehension are viewed as less attractive (Richmond & McCroskey, 1985). It seems logical, therefore, that both communication apprehension and immediacy would be factors in the evaluation of students.

Previous studies found that student perceptions of teacher immediacy were strong predictors of affective learning, but little relationship has been found between such perceptions and cognitive learning (Andersen, 1979; Andersen, Norton, & Nussbaum, 1981; Andersen & Withrow, 1981; Rodgers & McCroskey, 1984; Kearney, Plax, & Wendt-Wasco, 1985). Another purpose of this study is to examine the relationships among students' communication apprehension, their perceptions of nonverbal immediacy in general and in certain contexts.

Unlike previous studies, this one examined individuals' perception of their own immediacy. This perception is coorelated

with the final grade assigned by the instructor. Some past studies have examined the relationship between a person's degree of communication apprehension and his/her perception of self-immediacy, and the correlations were generally positive. Those experiencing high apprehension and low immediacy generally perceived themselves to have more communication problems and experience more negative consequences (Allen, Richmond, McCroskey, 1984; Richmond, McCroskey, Baldwin, & Berger, 1984; Allen & O'Mara, 1985). Another way this study differs from those previously reported is that the individual's general immediacy, and immediacy toward various target individuals is examined to ascertain the extent to which such immediacy may vary by context.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions were examined:

1. Are perceptions of students' general immediacy related to reports of the amount of communication apprehension experienced generally and in generalized contexts--groups, meetings, dyads, public speaking situations?

2. Are perceptions of immediacy experienced in varying contexts related to the amount of communication apprehension experienced generally or in generalized contexts--groups, meetings, dyads, public speaking situations?

3. Do the final grades students receive in the basic communication course differ with the amount of communication apprehension experienced generally and in generalized contexts--groups, meetings, dyads, public speaking situations.

4. Do the grades students receive in the basic course differ in terms of self-perceptions of their general and contextual immediacy?

SUBJECTS SELECTION AND PROCEDURES

Communication apprehension and immediacy instruments were administered to 389 undergraduate students enrolled in the required basic communication skills course at a medium-sized, private university in New England, spring, 1985. The subject pool contained 180 females and 209 males.

Instruments

Communication apprehension was conceptualized in terms of trait-like anxiety associated with four separate oral communication contexts. Communication was operationally defined as the score received on the 24 item Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (McCroskey, 1986). The PRCA-24 has demonstrated internal reliability coefficients of .96 (McCroskey, 1981). In this study the reliability coefficient for the total PRCA was .86.

Nonverbal immediacy was measured by four Likert-type scales. After reading a definition of nonverbal immediacy, students were asked to indicate on scales from one to seven (1 being highly immediate, 7 being lowly immediate) the extent of their immediacy generally, with fellow students, with university instructors generally, and with their communication course instructor.

RESULTS

As Table 1 shows, communication apprehension, overall and in generalized contexts, was moderately correlated with generalized and contextual immediacy. However, all correlations were significant. The lowest correlations are between the public speaking context and the contexts of immediacy. Immediacy with the students' specific communication instructor was highly correlated with communication apprehension overall and in each context. These results indicate that immediacy gets lower as communication apprehension rises. Moreover, it appears that students feel more comfortable interacting--less apprehensive and more nonverbally immediate--in their communication class than in other educational and non-educational contexts.

Table 1 about here

Table 2 presents the means for generalized and contextual immediacy relative to levels of general trait-like and generalized context immediacy. It will be noted that slightly over 17 percent of the students in this study were highly apprehensive. This is well within the expected norm of 15-20 percent. As would be expected the means for immediacy varied in all contexts by levels of overall communication apprehension experienced. It is also noteworthy that significant differences among highs, moderates,

and lows were less obvious in the public speaking and meeting contexts, more formal interaction modes in which less immediacy would be expected. Of course, as Table 3 shows, these are the contexts in which apprehension is highest.

Table 2 about here

In terms of the impact of communication apprehension on grades, Table 3 indicates that PRCA means overall and in generalized contexts were not significantly different for any final grade.

Table 3 about here

Table 4 shows that 40 percent of those who were highly apprehensive received a final grade of "C" or less, while 35 percent of the moderates and 35 percent of those who were lowly apprehensive received a grade of "C" or less. However, mean scores relating CA level and grade were not significantly different.

Table 4 about here

As can be seen by Table 5, the grades students received were not affected by their perceptions of either their general tendency to be immediate or their immediacy with the communication instructor who assigned the grade.

Table 5 about here

DISCUSSION

Data collected on 389 students would question previous studies which indicate that those who are highly apprehensive receive lower final grades than do moderately and lowly apprehensive students. It may be that many highly apprehensive students either possess or develop the competence to pass the tests and the skills to make B's while still experiencing a high level of apprehension. In other words, the possiblity exists that a student's motivation to receive a good grade may be an incentive to fulfill classroom speaking assignments even when extreme discomfort is being felt (Beatty & Frost, 1985).

While it is expected that those who lack motivation and/or

the necessary skills will receive lower grades, the consequences are likely to be greater for the high CA. For some students high CA may be a precursor to the development of motivation and communication skill, and, yet, low evaluations may result in higher CA leading to more communication avoidance and lack of practice needed to develop interaction skills. As this vicious cycle develops high CAs likely become so afraid of communicating that the expectancy to fail becomes a lifetime habit. These are the extreme cases of "learned helplessness." Those high CAs who are fighting their "flight" tendency in order to get a good grade in an oral performance class always risk their CA becoming worse. There needs to be much more research into the relationship among communication apprehension, competency, and motivation.

The current version of the PRCA-24 measures CA in group, meeting, dyad, and public speaking contexts. The meeting construct is thought to measure behaviors isomorphic with those used in classroom communication (Richmond & McCroskey, 1985). In this study, the generalized contexts of CA did not differently affect students' achievement. This may indicate that the communication behaviors required of students did not engage CA in one context more than the other. In other words, grades may have been based equally upon class discussion, group participation, public speaking, etc. Future studies should examine whether the type of communication behavior weighted in grading affects CA in generalized contexts.

Nonverbal immediacy was correlated with communication apprehension. As was expected, when CA went up, immediacy came down. Once more there is an indication that the highly communication apprehensive person, who is also skill deficient (those who make lower grades in a skills class) may live in a very lonely and unproductive world.

In this study, grades were not affected by students' perceived immediacy. However, these were very global measures, and replication is warranted. Perhaps, those who are highly apprehensive do not see themselves as nonimmediate as they really are. It would be interesting to compare such self-perceptions with the ratings of significant others--friends, fellow students, teachers, etc.

The finding of a lack of a relationship between grades and immediacy was not completely unexpected based upon previous research which concludes that nonverbal immediacy is a better indicator of affective than cognitive learning. It may also be that the immediacy construct is too general to effectively predict many specific outcomes.

However, a more plausible interpretation exists for the lack of relationships among CA, immediacy, and grades. Both CA and immediacy as measured here are broad, traitlike personality orientations. There is evidence that traitlike differences

diminish as situations become more familar (McCroskey, 1984; Richmond & McCroskey, 1985). Perhaps the familar setting of the communication classroom becomes more positively reinforcing over time, and the effects of prevailing traitlike CA and immediacy, both generally and in specific contexts, on class outcomes is diminished. The students' base level of CA and immediacy remain the same in less familar surroundings, and consequences are likely to be more negative. Such an interpretation may serve to explain why instructors in communication classes were perceived as more immediate than instructors generally.

Researchers should continue to investigate the mediating effect of both communication apprehension and immediacy as they impact learning and educational perceptions. However, grades may not be the best way to determine such effects. Moreover, more attention must be given to the combined or interaction effects of a host of communication variables which operate in the teacher-learner environment.

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TABLE 1

CORRELATIONS BETWEEN STUDENTS' COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION AND IMMEDIACY

Communication Apprehension Contexts (n=389)	Generalized Immediacy	Immediacy with students	Immediacy with instructors generally	Immediacy with Communication instructor
Group	.30	.27	.25	.32
Dyad	.25	.26	.25	.29
Meeting	.31	.34	.26	.27
Public	.15 *	.16 *	.25	.25
Overall CA	.31	.31	.31	.35

* P<.003; all others P<.0001

TABLE 2

STUDENTS' MEAN SCORE FOR GENERAL AND CONTEXTUAL IMMEDIACY
BY LEVEL OF COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION

Communication Apprehension Level	Generalized Immediacy	Immediacy with students	Immediacy with instructors generally	Immediacy with Communicati instructor
Group				
High (n=47)	*3.52 a.b.	*3.73 a,b	**4.07 a,b	*3.95 a,b
Moderate (n=282)	3.04 a,c	3.13 a,c	3.40 a,c	3.12 a,c
Low (n=60)	2.13 b,c	2.53 b,c	3.02 b,c	2.37 b,c
Meeting				
High (n=92)	*3.38 a,b	*3.65 a,b	*3.94 a.b	*3.75 a,b
Moderate (n=258)	2.88 a,c	2.99 a	3.30 a	2.95 a
Low (n=39)	2.36 b,c	2.62 b	2.95 b	2.56 b
Dyad				
High (n=36)	*3.74 a,b	*3.94 a,b	.*4.09 a,b	*3.83 a,b
Moderate (n=302)	2.98 a,c	3.10 a,c	3.45 a,c	3.13 a,c,
Low (n=51)	2.25 b,c	2.61 b,c	2.75 b,c	2.37 b,c
Public				
High (n=169)	****3.15 a	***3.35 a	**3.71 a,b	*3.40 a,b
Moderate (n=207)	2.80 a	2.92 a	3.23 a	2.93 a,c
Low (n=13)	2.77	3.07	2.69 b	1.85 b,c
Overall				
High (n=67)	*3.76 a,b	*3.80 a,b	*4.15 a,b	*3.97 a,b
Moderate (n=258)	2.90 a,c	3.09 a,c	3.42 a,c	3.06 a,c
Low (n=64)	2.36 a,c,	2.55 b,c	2.76 b,c	2.46 b,c

Significant differences among CA levels in each context, as determined by the Student-Newman-Keuls Procedure, are designated by alphabetic sign (e.g., a-a, b-b, c-c).

* P<.0001
** P<.0005
*** P<.01
**** P<.05

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TABLE 3

STUDENTS' MEAN PRCA SCORE BY
INSTRUCTORS' ASSIGNED GRADE

PRCA Context	Grades Assigned (n=389) A(n=87)	B(n=163)	C(n=96)	D(n=27)	F(n=26)
Group	13.91	14.65	15.66	14.31	14.23
Meeting	15.56	16.83	17.07	15.08	14.62
Dyad	14.32	14.79	14.92	14.15	14.85
Public	20.28	19.54	19.42	19.77	17.69
Overall	64.08	65.8	66.98	63.31	61.38

TABLE 4

PERCENTAGE OF SUBJECTS AT EACH CA LEVEL
BY INSTRUCTORS' ASSIGNED GRADE

Communication Apprehension Level	A(n=87)	B(n=163)	C(n=96)	D(n=27)	F(n=12)
High CA (PRCA>79) (n=64)	21.1 (n=13)	38.5 (n=25)	32.7 (n=21)	5.8 (n=4)	1.9 (n=1)
Moderate CA (PRCA>51 & <80) (n=258)	21.4 (n=55)	43.7 (n=113)	22.3 (n=57)	7.4 (n=19)	5.2 (n=14)
Low CA (PRCA<52) (n=67)	28.6 (n=19)	36.5 (n=25)	27.0 (n=18)	6.3 (n=4)	1.6 (n=1)

These categories (low, moderate, high CA) employ the mean on the total PRCA from previous studies, with subjects scoring one standard deviation above the mean as high CA and those scoring one SD below as low CA (McCroskey, 1986)

TABLE 5

MEANS OF STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF IMMEDIACY GENERALLY AND WITH THEIR INSTRUCTOR BY GRADE RECEIVED

Immediacy	A(n=87)	B(n=163)	C(n=96)	D(n=27)	F(n=16)
Generally*	3.0	3.0	3.3	3.2	3.3
With Comm. Instructor*	2.9	3.1	3.0	3.7	2.8

*Not significant, $p>.05$.